

CHAPTER I ENVIRONMENT

THE COUNTRY

131 THE people who call themselves Nupe live in the heart of Nigeria, in the low basin that is formed by the valleys of the two rivers Niger and Kaduna, between 9° 30' and 8° 30' N.L. A line drawn from Leaba, on the Niger, eastward to Kataregi marks the northern boundary of Nupe land, another line drawn eastward from Shari (or Tsearagi) to Abugi and on to the Niger south of Baro the southern boundary. The Niger, flowing almost straight north-south between Leaba and Jebba, divides Nupe country from Yoruba in the west; the slowly rising country, east of Lapai and Gidi, sloping upward towards the hills of Gbari country, forms the eastern boundary of Nupe.

133 It is a low-lying, softly undulating country, not more than 200 feet above sea-level in most parts. A few low ridges of broken, rocky hills stretch out, rib-like, from the river valleys, and curiously symmetrical flat-topped hillocks rise abruptly here and there from the plain. The highest points are no more than 800 feet above sea-level. At Jebba the Niger forces its way through a narrow passage formed by rocks, the ragged end of a short, broken chain of hills. Farther south, at Kpatagbā and Baro, and above Yankyedya in the north, hills and rocks close in upon the river. Rabá, the ancient river capital of Nupe kingdom, stands on high cliffs of red sandstone. Between cliffs and rocks the river bed is bordered by low banks on which stretches of thick rain-forest alternate with shrub and low bush. During the rains both forest-covered banks and open bush are flooded far inland and turned into vast swamps; the level of the Kaduna at Wuya rises by 30 feet; and in the Niger valley villages which lie on high ground in the dry season have the water of the river washing the threshold of their houses. Part of Jebba Island is flooded every year; and Nupeko, near the confluence of Niger and Kaduna, about two miles from the river in the dry season, can be reached only by canoe in the rains.

134 The big rivers Niger and Kaduna form the two axes of the country, an efficient, natural system of communication. It is no accident that the early Nupe kingdom grew in the area near the confluence of the two rivers, which were its first high-roads as well as its natural boundaries. A net of smaller rivers and creeks, rich in fish, covers the country, providing an efficient system of natural irrigation. In most parts of Nupe land the soil is rich and fertile, especially in the thinly inhabited districts west of the Kaduna, the only part of Nupe which still possesses large areas of virgin forest. East of the Kaduna, especially round Bida, a dense population and intensive cultivation have reduced the fertility of the land. It is the typical soil of Northern Nigeria, red earth mixed with laterite and rich in silicates—a fact which becomes important for the native glass industry in Bida. In a few districts, round Sakpe and near

1: Nadel E-5 (1934-1936) 1942

FF52 Nupe FF52



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SURROUNDINGS OF BIDA



THE KADUNA RIVER NEAR GBARA

[FACING p. 4]

LANGUAGE

- 197 Nupe belongs to the Larger Unit^a of Kwa languages of West Africa, which also includes the languages or dialects spoken by the Igbira, Igala, Idoma, and other peoples dealt with in this volume of the Ethnographic Survey.⁴

The Nupe Dialect Cluster together with those of Igbira and Gbari¹ make up the Nupe Language Group. But the Nupe are not linguistically homogeneous or exclusive. The bi-lingual Gbari of Paiko and Lapai also speak Nupe, while some of the split-off sections and colonies of Nupe have lost their native tongue. The Kakanda are said to speak a closely related language which may be a Nupe dialect. Although Gbari is a separate dialect cluster of the Nupe Language Group much of its vocabulary is identical with Nupe, which also has a close structural resemblance to both Gbari and Kakanda.

- The Nupe cluster consists of five markedly different dialects: Nupe proper; Ebe, spoken by the Ebe sub-tribe; Zifako or Dibo, more closely related to Gbari; Kupa, spoken by the Kupa and Cekpan sub-tribes; Basa-Nge, spoken by the Basa-Nge, a split-off section. The Gbedye sub-tribe are said to have spoken a separate dialect which is now lost. Nupe proper is spoken by the Kyedye sub-tribe and others and there are only insignificant dialectal differences between the areas where it is spoken. Bida Nupe ("higher Nupe") exhibits a fondness for Hausa words and phrases which have replaced many Nupe words. The other four dialects differ considerably from each other and from Nupe as spoken in the rest of the country, but most of the speakers of these dialects are bi-lingual and also speak Nupe proper.⁴

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

- 133 The Nupe country is low-lying and undulating, not more than 200 ft. above sea level in most parts. A few ridges of rocky hills and some flat-topped hillocks rise above the plain; the highest of these are not more than 800 ft. above sea level. On the banks of the Niger there are stretches of thick riverain forest alternating with shrub and low bush. During the rains, the forest-covered banks and the open bush are flooded far inland and become vast swamps.

The Niger and the Kaduna Rivers form the two axes of the country. A network of smaller rivers and creeks, rich in fish, provides an efficient system of natural irrigation. Upstream from Jebba Island the Niger is narrow, with rapids and dangerous rocky passages. Between Jebba Island and Baro it is broad and navigable for big steamers for half the year.

- 134 The soil is mostly rich and fertile, especially in the thinly populated districts to the west of the Kaduna River. Round Bida town fertility has been much reduced by over-cultivation. The soil consists of red earth mixed with laterite and is rich in silicates. There is some iron ore which is mined by the natives on the slopes of the low broken hills.

- 137 The vegetation is typical for an area of transition from the southern forest belt to the northern savannah. Narrow strips or patches of thick forest vegetation lie in the river valleys and watercourses; inland, thick forest, shrub, and orchard bush alternate with open parkland, except round Bida and Agaie, where it has been cleared by intensive cultivation. There is virgin forest west of Kaduna.

Nupe country is the most northern area for oil-palm, yam, and the southern variety of maize; it is at the southern limit for date-palm, shea-nut, and millet. Other trees are: locust-bean, indigo, silk-cotton, mango (a European importation), kola-nut, and banana.⁵

^a Westermann and Bryan, 1952, pp. 85-6. Their terminology is used here.

⁴ See below, pp. 68-166.

⁵ To be dealt with in a forthcoming volume of the Survey.

⁶ Nadel, 1942, pp. 13-14, 18, 23, 132; 1940, p. 165; Westermann, 1955; Meek, 1955, p. 137 (and map); Temple, 1919, pp. 113, 117, 320, 324.

⁷ Nadel, 1942, p. 1; 1940a, p. 194.

PLATE I-J.

MAY, SEPTEMBER, 1933.

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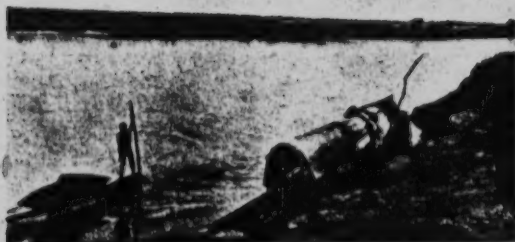


FIG. 1. LANDING-PLACE AT GEMBA, ONE OF THE IGBU VILLAGES.



FIG. 2. THE "CHAIN OF TROOPS."

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FIG. 3. THE SACRED HOUSES BUILT AT IGBU.



FIG. 4. VILLAGE CHIEF WITH HIS WIFE.

THE KING'S HANDBEN IN CENTRAL NIGERIA.

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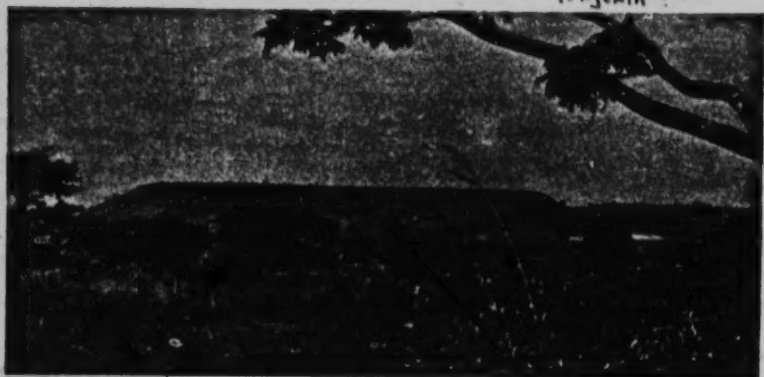
6: Buchanan K-5 (ca. 1952) 1953 MS12

Fulani MS11

Hausa

Nupe FF52

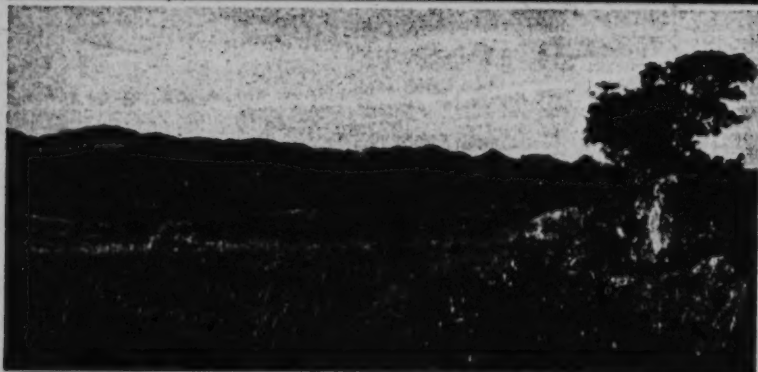
Nigeria FF1



N4

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N1

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FIG. 2—Degraded Guinea savanna in the Nupe country, Niger Province. Flat-topped hills are of Nupe sandstone.

FIG. 3—Rocky southwestern ramparts of the Jos Plateau, here rising some 3000 feet above the plain.

FIG. 4—Seasonal swamp, or *fadama*, in the Sokoto Valley near Birnin Kebbi. These swamps play an important role in the dry-season grazing economy of the Fulani.